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Districts sent out preliminary pink slips to teachers

By Debbie Pfeiffer Trunnell Staff Writer

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The county's school districts issued hundreds of preliminary layoff notices to teachers and other certificated staff this week, prior to Tuesday's state deadline.

In the San Bernardino City Unified School District alone more than 200 notices were sent as the district faces another year of deep budget cuts.

"This is the worst budget situation for our district I have ever seen going into the 2011-2012 school year," said Rebecca Harper, president of the San Bernardino Teachers Association. "And my concern is the loss of teacher jobs affects class sizes, the community and economy."

March 15 is the annual deadline for school districts to sent preliminary layoff notices to teachers and other certificated school staff in California. The decision on who will lose jobs is made by May 15, the state deadline for final notification.

The local educators receiving the notices join more than 10,000 statewide at risk for losing their jobs, That number could go as high as

17,000, said Paul Hefner, a spokesman for the California Department of Education.

It is all part of the worst case scenario State Superintendent of Public Instruction Tom Torlakson anticipates if Gov. Jerry Brown's proposed tax extensions are rejected by voters in June or never come to a vote.

Torlakson has warned that without an extension, an all- cuts budget could force the state to cut school spending by as much as \$4.5 billion or 10 percent of the K-12 annual

budget.

It is of such cause for concern that he recently sent out a letter asking county superintendents if districts are producing their layoff and program reduction plans based on the all-cuts budget assumption.

In San Bernardino City Unified, where the school board recently voted to send out notices to 272 teachers, the district is looking to cut \$9 million from its budget with the extension and \$25 million without.

Last year, the district was in similar dire straits but was able to save jobs using a mix of one time federal stimulus funding, Quality Education Investment Act funding and early retirement.

Without that funding available there is a likely possibility they won't be able to bring back all the teachers, said Tillman.

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There could also be even more job cuts if unions do not approve a 5 percent pay cut for all district employees to save money, he added.

In Fontana Unified, where school board members recently warned 68 counselors they might not have jobs next year, notices will go out to 51 teachers.

The decisions have been reached based on the district facing \$11.8 million in cuts if the extension passes, and \$24.8 million without, said Superintendent Cali Olsen-Binks.

It has created a situation where she feels desperately helpless.

"We are at a place where we are short staffed, what we provide at school sites is challenged and we have maximum class sizes," she said. "In some cases we have whole families employed by the district, and it has a huge impact on them."

To save teachers' jobs and ensure other services remain available, she hopes voters approve the tax extension.

"It's not about politics," she said. "It's about providing vital services for our future. Of all the investments people can make there's not a better one than kids."

Eighty-two teachers received preliminary pink slips in the Rialto Unified School District.

The potential cuts of teachers and others is to deal with a loss of funding of \$9.5 million

without the tax extension going into the 2011-2012 school year.

Mike Ridgway, the district's school board president, described the situation as devastating.

"This is on top of three years of cuts and it just goes on and on," he said. "There has even been talk of reducing the school year further."

Despite the worst case scenario, the district will do all it can to save jobs.

"We would much rather pay people to work than to stay home," he said. "So we will work hard to bring everyone back."

The decision on how many notices will go out to Colton Joint Unified teachers is still a work in progress, said district spokeswoman Katie Orloff.

The district will need to take some action as it faces cutting \$10.5 million, assuming there is not a tax extension, from its budget.

"We have focused on the scenario of no extension," said Orloff. "Our goal is to do the best we can for our students as well as ensuring the district is fiscally sound."

After making \$29 million in cuts in the Redlands Unified School District in the last three years, taking away everything from teachers to programs, the district is only sending pink slips to two adult education nursing teachers.

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"The bottom line is we have had a budget reduction plan in place that has put us in the position to only pink slip two teachers," said Sabine Robertson-Phillips, the district's assistant superintendent, human resources. "But no school district in this state is out of the woods."

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